Q: Who is Your Boss?
A: The Customer

Last weekend, my wife Linda and I spent two nights at the Sonnenalp Resort of Vail, Colorado. The hotel was completely sold out; yet, every staff member I encountered was warm and friendly, while also being very competent and efficient. They were all focused on The Customer, and it reminded me once again that customer focus is always the hallmark of great companies, large and small.

The proprietor of the Sonnenalp Resort is Johannes Faessler, a European-born, fourth-generation hotelier. We chatted with him at breakfast our first morning there. We saw him again that evening while he was making the rounds of the lobby, cocktail lounge, and dining room, just to make sure that everything was going well. It was quickly obvious to me that his leadership and example are the reasons why every employee of the Sonnenalp believes that attention to the customer is their No. 1 job.

One could say, “That kind of attention to customer service might be achievable in a 90-suite hotel, but it is difficult or near impossible in a larger hotel or a chain of hotels scattered across many miles or countries.” I could not disagree more. Marriott and other successful hotel chains, including Outrigger and OHANA Hotels & Resorts, are doing a good job in this area. Unfortunately, not all hotel companies follow this example.

Mike Leven, president and CEO of U.S. Franchise Systems, which operates nearly 500 properties with brands such as Microtel, Hawthorn Suites, and America’s Best Inns & Suites, is passionate about putting the customer first. I first met Mike about 20 years ago when he was president and CEO of Days Inns of America, and we placed the Days Inn flag on the former OHANA Waikiki Hobron. We have remained good friends ever since.

In a recent interview with travel executive and writer Melinda Bush, CHA, Leven talked about the customer. "No matter the size of the organization, if a customer-oriented culture doesn’t exist, the organization will eventually fail.”

Leven, who started his 43-year career in the hotel industry as a sales rep for the Hotel Roosevelt in New York City, continued, “As companies grow, they get farther and farther away from the customer. You begin to place your attention on your internal, not external, customers. Hiring, training, meetings, discussing, budget management, [and] pleasing your boss ... these become the functions of the business, taking you farther away from what is the essence of the business: the customer.

“The end result is that you stop talking to customers because you are talking to yourselves. [Then] you go out and spend millions of dollars to hire a major research or advertising firm, and in effect, you tell them, ‘You go out and talk to my customers; I don’t want to talk to them anymore.’ Why? Because my focus is that I have to please my boss, my department head, and my peers. The end result: the customer sits out there looking for help and can’t find anybody.”

Our company’s founders, Roy and Estelle Kelley, were also passionate about talking to our customers. Estelle had her desk in the lobby of the Edgewater Hotel, and Roy’s desk was right next to the front desk in the lobby of the Reef Hotel. They talked to customers all day.

In today’s fast-paced world of computers and the Internet, even the best-intentioned hospitality professionals sometimes focus on the blue glow of the computer terminal in front of them and not the customer standing there — someone who probably traveled thousands of miles and, particularly at this time of year, may have endured delays and
hassles along the way.

No matter how busy you get, take a tip from Roy and Estelle Kelley, Mike Leven, and Johannes Faessler. Forget about the computers, your budgets, your spreadsheets, or the next meeting for a while, and talk to your real boss—The Customer.